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Memorywork · Susan Malka Choi

IN 1963 I was in Ann Arbor. I remember the usual things, like a blouse that I wore as often as I thought I could get away with it, and where I was the day they shot Kennedy. I think everyone must remember things like that. The blouse was thin and white, with no sleeves and a peter pan collar. Small buttons the milky color of imitation pearl. It was a flirtatious little blouse. Because I remember it so well I will always confuse myself in memory, thinking that it was a warm summer day when JFK died.

I was walking through the quad before I knew what had happened. The eeriest feeling of my life: something palpably malicious hung in the air, like a sharply drawn breath held trapped in the lungs for too long. There was something else strange, wrong, that gave me the thought of summer. It was biting cold, yet the quad was peppered with small knots of people who stood absolutely still, shoulder to shoulder, their heads almost touching. Like tiny football huddles, engaged in silent prayer. At the heart of each group was a transistor radio, stuttering that terribly lonely, distant radio sound. I passed one group and heard a soft noise of choking, and later I knew it was weeping.

Kennedy had been to Ann Arbor the year before, to unveil the Peace Corps. I met Jay at the speech, and that is the source of another snag in my memory. I will always associate Jay with JFK, and this has me convinced that I cried the day that JFK was shot. I was in love, and my love threw an umbrella of tremulous, precarious emotion over everything. I felt dangerously alive, in pain, on the very brink of disaster all the time. I have never been happier than I was then. I am always happy to feel on the verge of death.

But the truth is that I didn't cry when JFK was shot. I reported for work, as a secretary's helper in the economics department. When they waved me away, I was glad to go. I went home, flipped on the news, and fell asleep. Years later I had to admit to Bettina that I slept through most of the Sixties. I wore that peter pan collared blouse straight through for another decade, until the day it fell apart in the wash.

When I married Jay I agreed with him that we couldn't have any children until the dissertation was done. It would be impossible, he said. First things first: the dissertation, the degree, the job. Could I wait that long? It was

funny, because we both knew that I was only acting disappointed for him. I didn't want children, ever. My pretending to yearn and to pine was a lie. He knew, but it wasn't until much later that he hated me for it. We would giggle together about Macready, fishing the first draft of his dissertation out of a sewer grating with a bent-out coat hanger. Macready was Irish, Catholic, married since his undergraduate years. His five children had fed the dissertation between the rusted teeth of the sewer grating, a page at a time. The only copy. Children! We giggled, made love, smoked fiercely.

I proofed Jay's dissertation for what seemed like ten years, but it must have only been four. I kept my job as a secretary's helper, and when the secretary was fired for being pregnant, I was promoted to full secretary. Jay wondered why I didn't take advantage of staff privileges, audit a class or two. It was another lie we shared. I pretended to be simple, and content with the helpful things I did. I corrected his spelling. I balanced our checkbook. "A Jew," he would confirm, with a tone of finality that strangely sickened me. Then, I always laughed.

There are some pictures of us, from that time when we were happy. Just a few stacks, taken three different days, maybe three years apart. All that time, and only this remains. It's strange to think that you buy a camera, and suddenly there's another form of selective memory, rivalling your own. The pictures are bent and fused together, cardboardy to the touch. They are edged with a border of white. When Bettina pulls them apart, the fronts cling to the backs and carry a papery fuzz away that cannot be removed. Strange, linty clouds float over our faces, obscuring our expressions.

Bettina is aggrieved. She is almost twelve, old enough to drag herself out of my enforced amnesia and insist upon having a past. She hauls old shoeboxes out of my closet, upending their contents onto the floor. Carbon copies of old letters, in no apparent order. Medical bills. Half the manuscript of a story that begins, *She stood by the window, day after day, watching the rain . . .*

"Bettina!" I bark. From my bed I snatch at the air.

"Where are they?" She is on her hands and knees, pushing stubbornly through the slum of yellowed paper.

"Where are what?"

"The pictures."

"You have the pictures right there in front of you."

"These are all the same day." She peers at them with irritation, pulling carefully. She winces when they part with the tearing sound that means they will be forever marred by fuzz. "There's no date on these," she complains. She is flabbergasted by my disregard for the past, for what she thinks is her past. She is angry that I haven't kept it in better shape for her.

I half-crane for a better view, half-cringe. I don't really want to see those pictures. "1963," I declare. There is the blouse. I am smiling as if I would break. That fantastic, sweet pain. It must have been early on.

"Where are the pictures of me? The pictures of me, when Dad was here?" Bettina is deliberately emotionless, business-like. She is only cleaning, cleaning up this lousy mess I've made of our lives.

"I don't know," I tell her. "Now clean up that mess."

"Are there pictures of me?"

I waver between telling her No, telling her I don't remember, telling her Yes, somewhere. I don't want to say Yes. I don't want her to keep rooting around. I abruptly remember something I have been fighting hard to forget, a day I found Bettina shrieking in her room, a rare moment of hysteria. Even as a baby, she was usually sullen, glowering, silent. This day she wept until I appeared in the door, and then she hurled something at me. It might have been a lamp. Later I found the carbon, under her bed, of a letter I wrote to my sister that year, the year Bettina was eight. *When will I grow into this?* I had written. *When will it start? Everyone says I will learn to love her sometime . . . in answer to your question, No, she doesn't do a damn thing to help me. She's a kid. She doesn't do a damn thing.*

"I'll look for them," I tell her. For a moment, staring at the small, dark, truculent crown of her head, I am overwhelmed. She is a little foreigner, a little Martian. Sometimes, like this time, I love her. More often it is a struggle.

"Don't knock yourself out," she murmurs. She scoops the tattered salad of paper back into the boxes and leaves the room. A few minutes later I hear her music, the rock and roll that strikes a vaguely familiar chord in me whenever she plays it. If she is safely in her room, I will dance a little. I think it is the music from when I was young. I think I remember it.

Bettina is being taught a healthy respect for the past. It seems to be her classroom theme this year, the final year of elementary school. Next year she will be sent off to begin the harrowing career of a middle-schooler;

maybe this is why the teacher is working feverishly, self-righteously, to instill the kids with a sense of history and worth. I went storming to the school in an indignant rage when Bettina told me the latest project. I had complied, even gone out of my way, for the other projects. I thought I was paying my taxes so that I could leave these things to trained professionals, but I did them. I taught her to bake bread for Know the Pioneers Week. Another girl did hand-churned butter; Bettina's bread, unlike Bettina, was assimilated into the classroom scene with great success. Then I called my older sister for a crash course on the life of our mother, who had never bothered to know me, for Grandparentstory Week. I began to suspect that this unknown woman, this teacher, was using my child to teach me an unflattering lesson about myself, but I pretended great delight. I masqueraded as a normal, interested parent, until *The Way They Were*. When Bettina told me she needed a picture of her parents as young lovers, taken before she was born, I'd had enough. I would not have my child taught that every family was a Robert Redford love story. It seemed indecent, and insulting.

The classroom was in a temporary shack on blocks. When I opened the door I felt the need to duck, the door seemed so small, and I nearly fell into the room. I was fiercely blushing. I'd done myself up to be fearful, but I knew I'd overshot and ended up pathetic. I was packed into a one-piece suit from my secretarial days, and it was too tight. The skirt crept up off the hips and bunched fretfully around my waist. I was teetering in heels. I stood uncertainly on the threshold, flushed and mortified. It had been so long since I'd made myself up, I was checking my rouge every other second in the rearview the whole way over. Now I was convinced all over again that it was much too bright.

The teacher was older than I had expected, perhaps even older than I was. Her hair was blonde, but so abundant and fibrous that it could have been fake. Her face wore a matronly expression that defied any attempt to place her age. She had no wedding band, which surprised me.

"I'm Bettina's mother," I managed. I ventured unsteadily into the room and tried to look inquisitive. The large bulletin board was decorated with an elaborate racetrack, scattered across with cardboard cutouts of horses in flight. Each horse was slightly different, in color or in posture, and the lines were precise and delicate. I paused, admiring the care. They were embla-

zoned with names, the names proudly arcing across their flanks. I located Bettina near the lead. The board proclaimed: Attendance Winners!

It was true that she hardly missed a day. She never wanted to stay home.

"I'm Miss Shank," the teacher said, smiling broadly. The smile seemed to acknowledge the gracelessness of her name. "Bettina's right up there," she added. "It's a very close race this year."

"It's pretty." I nodded at the board.

"Oh." She waved a hand dismissively. "Horses are my great passion," she said. She said it as though it were an admission. "I'm really thrilled to meet you at last," she continued quickly. "I was sorry you couldn't make Open House, but it looks like you're feeling better."

I registered this rapidly. Bettina never told me about an Open House, but this was the sort of omission she committed without forethought. I was surprised she'd said I was sick. Out of last minute embarrassment, or malice.

"I was very ill," I agreed, smiling.

Miss Shank dragged an adult-sized chair out of one corner and gestured to it. "They're big kids," she laughed, "but we're bigger, right?"

I nodded, numbly. I had imagined the visit as a flouncing through the door, a flinging of words, a quick exit. Now I was embarrassed and at a loss. She seemed so personable, so personal. I flirted briefly with suspicion, tried to suspect she was taking me in. I reminded myself of Grandparent-story Week and how much it had hurt me. My oldest sister played mother to me because our own mother was too old, too tired, too uninterested to care by the time I was born. So I was also an unwanted child, I know it's unfair. Then I thought of Know the Pioneers Week. I had to practice the bread secretly, two afternoons in a row, while Bettina was at school. I was always a lousy cook and it made me ashamed. It was another thing Jay had used to humiliate me, again and again, until he finally left.

"It's about The Way They Were," I began, and stopped abruptly. My hands worked anxiously around the edges of my purse. It was a tiny purse, a purse I never used. My real purse was huge, stained, hideous.

She nodded wisely. "Bettina was concerned. She explained that most of your old pictures were lost in the fire."

I absorbed this news without betraying shock. Of course: the fire.

She paused, eyeing me with a reserved empathy. "It's not really the pictures themselves that are important. The point is to teach the children a

lesson they often learn too late, that their parents were once young, beautiful, excited about the future." She laughed. "Not to say that now all of you parents are old, ugly, and resigned."

I couldn't help it. I burst out laughing also, and she smiled appreciatively.

"It's just so hard for children to see beyond themselves, at this age. When they realize there was a time before they were born, a time when their parents actually existed without them, it teaches them something they may not show for a long time, but—" she held up a finger of warning—"it will come out one day. Children have to learn to esteem their parents as people, not just old windbags, disciplinarians, handservants. It's very hard." She sat back, a little breathless.

"Do you have children?" I ventured. I already knew what the answer was.

"No," she blurted out. After a slight pause she said again, "No, I don't."

I nodded carefully. I was cautious, afraid of appearing judgmental. Now I saw us as allies, as strategists. She seemed suddenly embarrassed.

"I know what you're thinking," she claimed.

"No, I think it's wonderful." My heart sank, unworthy of her project. "I really do."

She twisted one strange lock of hair, angrily. "You know, I lost my parents a few years ago, both of them. They weren't so old. It was an accident. I'd never imagined they would be gone one day, without warning." She nodded, without looking at me. "I'd always assumed there would be an interval, between knowing they would die, and death."

"Time at the deathbed," I offered. "A chance to say things."

"Yes." She caught my eye again, a little fiercely. She was not smiling anymore. "It's an old story, right? 'I never had a chance to say,' et cetera."

"I lost my mother when I was very young," I assured her. "I was angry, for years. Just sort of, I don't know, angry."

She nodded. We both looked away, at other parts of the room. In one corner I thought I could see an essay, tacked to the wall, in Bettina's hand. Her unexpectedly childish, cringing, disastrous cursive. I tried to look at my watch. I was always afraid when I left Bettina alone. Not afraid of what she was doing, but afraid of what she might find. I thought of the pictures, the letters, the furious disarray of my files. And Bettina picking through them with single-minded determination, and her unacknowledged fear of what she would find, what she would confirm about us both.

Miss Shank spoke up again, with formal caution. "Would I be too bold to assume . . . that there was never a fire?"

I smiled wanly. "Bettina thinks I'm sloppy. Maybe it seems like a fire to her." I wondered what made me find excuses for her. "There are some pictures of her parents, before we divorced. I haven't taken a whole lot of care with them." Briefly remembering my initial rage, I added, "It hasn't been a picture book life."

"I'm sorry," Miss Shank murmured. "It was an intrusion, a really thoughtless intrusion, and I'm sorry." She shrugged helplessly. My stomach became an anxious fist, unhappily aware that I was in the wrong. I didn't want her to surrender an apology to me, it made me stunned with shame. I wanted her to be severe with me, to be scolding, to exclaim that she had expected better. I realized I hadn't spoken.

"I feel so stupid," she added uneasily. "I guess I'm still stuck an angry child. I've never got to be an angry parent."

I stood up quickly, embarrassed. I wanted to say something that would dissipate our conversation like so much courteous hot air. "Bettina likes you very much," I offered. Bettina never spoke about her teachers at all, but when I said this I thought it was true.

Miss Shank took the cue, and stood also. "Bettina is very bright," she said mechanically. "Excellent in her reading, excellent in her memorywork. I'm enjoying having her."

I backed unevenly to the door. "Thank you," I said. It was a catastrophe, because I liked her. My incompetence infuriated me. I actually liked her.

"Thank *you*," she said stiffly.

Bettina's choice lies in a small envelope on the table. It couldn't be called a choice: it was the only one we found. A wedding picture. Suddenly, I remember a day at the height of summer—1965? 1964?—when Jay and I were renting a broken-down house in the country. I could put three things together and have the date exact, but I will not put three things together. Jay was teaching in the summer session at Eastern Michigan. Our porch had a trellis, choked with roses. I said, "They only grow if you don't care either way." We put bright green butterfly chairs in the yard, and took two pictures. One of Jay reclining in his chair, a pipe clamped between his teeth, a look of incredible audacity on his face. One of me stretched out in my chair, my eyes tensely closed, my body pale as a corpse.

I couldn't tell Bettina that it was always that way: he and I, alone. I couldn't tell her the truth: that our love never did endure company, and that we three would not have endured at all. She believes I cheated her out of a father, and her father believes the same. But what I want to ask is, If the child was so important, why am I the one who has her? If the child was the reason, how could he have gone without her? I want to ask this, but there is no decent way to do it. There is no decent woman who would say it.

So, there were always two of us. Never a third, to hold the camera and click. And the only picture of Jay and I together is on our wedding day.

Bettina was skeptical. I don't seem to do anything but give her fuel for her skepticism. "You didn't have any friends?" she demanded. "Any at all?"

"I guess we never had a friend and a camera at the same time."

Bettina shook her head, annoying me with her childish doubt. She peered closely at the wedding picture. It is a snapshot; there was no official photographer. Someone must have mailed it to us. It is a terrible picture, taken in the lounge of the University Chapel, a low room muffled by dun-colored drapes. The furniture is all orange and avocado, kitchen colors. Jutting into the frame at the left, the end of a folding table showing its metal legs beneath a white cloth. Stumbling out of the frame at the right, my sister. She appears to be my mother, both because she is old enough to have been my mother and because she is visibly disgusted. Jay and I stand in the middle, dressed only slightly better than the most casual guest. He is eating cake with his hand, staring off to one side. I face the camera flashing that explosive, murderous smile.

"I'm sorry," I told Bettina. I was, terribly, sorry.

"It's alright," she said. She regarded the picture with sudden, quiet understanding. As though the truth of it was what pleased her.

"Ain't no fairy tale, kid." I fought the urge to put my hand in her tangled hair and really mess it up. I kept still, looking over her shoulder.

"Mom," she said, leaning forward with an exaggerated air of secrecy. "*Truth is—*"

She made mocking eyebrows, letting the sentence dangle like an idiot question.

I waited for her to finish.

"Truth is, I've known it all along."

Today is the day that I have to get rid of it. I watch Bettina eat her breakfast, chewing every bite with a methodical fixity that amuses me. She is turning into a real person, this kid. She read somewhere that chewing every bite one hundred times could lead to weight loss, fooling the brain into filling the stomach with less. Now, in retrospect, she has proclaimed she has a weight problem.

I used to kill myself to love her. Now, without trying, I find myself liking her. More and more.

"Don't forget the picture," I tell her. The bus is blaring impatiently, but she is unflustered. She snatches up the envelope, throwing me a sly grin on her way out the door.

After she is gone I sit at the table a long time, willing myself to do it. I have to get rid of it because keeping it means hiding it, and hiding the ugly things about yourself gains nothing and loses so much time. It is only Bettina growing larger, angrier, increasingly articulate and demanding, that forces my head out of the sand and commands me to do something. I remember passing a long window and being shocked by my own reflection: a squat little fireplug on legs. One moment of awareness in ten years. Later I told Bettina I wished I'd had a full-length mirror all my life. I always refused to own one, out of righteous indignation, or false pride. Now, I regretted it acutely. If I'd had one, maybe things would have been different. Maybe I would have paid better attention to what I looked like, and ended up a better person in the end.

"You can't be serious," she'd sneered. "You think your whole life would've turned out differently, if you had a bigger *mirror*?"

I go into my bedroom and pull the spare blankets out of a dresser drawer. Aside from what is discarded in the closet there are the things I'd truly hoped to lose. I empty the drawer and carefully slide my hand beneath the paper liner. There is only more paper, the sheets pressed carefully between the liner and the bed of the drawer like cherished leaves: a letter from Jay that made me vomit the first time I read it, and the carbon Bettina found, four years ago. Also, a very large photograph, an X-ray, in livid black and white. She does not know anything about it, but this is the picture Bettina is always looking for, a picture that offers some proof.

In it, the fetus is featureless and budlike, a lumpen blaze of light. At sixteen weeks everything is there, in grotesque proportion: the bulbous head, the delicate hinge of a leg, a hint of an arm. It is a poor X-ray, and the

details are blurred. Still, you can see that something must accentuate the curl of that tiny body. The body is not simply shaped like a curl, it really *is* curling, clutching and clinging at something with inconceivable determination. Bent on being alive. The wisp of a thread betrays the prize in its fist, a prize it snatched like the brass ring off a merry-go-round. You may not be able to see it, but it's there. Impossibly, almost hilariously there. The baby is brandishing an IUD, and earning a place in Michigan medical history for us both.

I take the X-ray into the kitchen and set it on fire. It makes a rank smell from the developing chemicals and the gloss, but it burns. The corners cringe together, furling and swiftly blackening. When it is done I sweep the ashes together and throw them all over the yard. Then I make a tall glass of lemonade and play like it's summer.

Truth is, Bettina is right to be suspicious: I remember more than I admit. I remember that in 1967 we were in Ypsilanti, and preparing to leave. The prelude was complete: dissertation, degree, a job near the ocean. Jay and I shared the twin sense that the beginning had finally arrived, but our expectations were not the same. Jay had turned his unswerving attention to the accomplishment of children. For him children had always been the fourth term in the series, the next logical step. And it's true, I had always known this. But I was depending on a romantic change of scenery: we would walk near the sea and be battered by wind until our differences left us. Jay would realize it was just too soon for children, and then everything could start. I would pull myself together and do something of my own.

I'd started putting the Ypsilanti house into boxes months ahead of time. Those days were gigantic, emptied of everything but waiting. I was always alone. An eventless year is easiest to remember, in all its tiresome detail: the whirr of the electric clock, the morning light thick with dust. My flaking gold barrette and my plushy flowered housecoat. Always looking ahead, I lost track of the time. Summer seemed perpetual.

When I realized I hadn't been bleeding, I didn't know how many months I had skipped. There were no other symptoms. I knew the absence was a sure sign, but it was flatly impossible. After Jay banned birth control I had barely hesitated before visiting a doctor. I justified it as a necessary deceit, the only way to buy myself some time, and I was confident I could bring Jay around without his ever having to know. The thing would hang within me like a small pendant, a wire scrawl, undetectable. Jay and I would just

happen to be unlucky, for six months or maybe a year, and soon it would cease to matter. It never occurred to me that the thing wouldn't work.

When the extraordinary circumstances of the pregnancy were explained to Jay, he was very quiet. The packing, abruptly suspended, had left the house with a vaguely exploded look. For days we picked carefully through the rooms, staring mostly at the floor. Our eyes met once over a teetering pile of books, once through the spidery stack of the butterfly chairs. I think he was grateful for the obstacles between us. When I finally sought him out, in his study, the X-ray lay on the desk between his hands. I stood at his back and felt the motionless rage there, hanging off him like a cape. I wanted to yank it away and be done with it. Things had changed and we had to let them change.

"Tricky thief." He could not see me nod at the picture.

"Like its mother," he said.

I was silent. It was already scripted, anything I could have said, and his response. If I'd wanted to wait: we'd waited. If I never wanted children: I'd lied. "Jay," I said. "Please turn around."

"I can't," he said.

Bettina will demonstrate her memorywork. I am very honored. She does not normally come to me with these things, but this time I asked. I wanted to know what it was. "I hear you're real good at it," I tell her. "Miss Shank said you were excellent." I pause over "excellent," and swell a little with pleasure. "*Excellent.*"

Bettina frowns darkly. "Miss Shank told you? What'd you do, go and embarrass me?"

"Me? Embarrass you?" I wave her away with a grand gesture. "Go on. I was just trying to find out why you're doing so well. I thought you had some unholy arrangement with this woman."

Bettina turns very solemn. She puts on that you're-not-gonna-believe-this look again. "Mom," she says mournfully. "Truth is, I'm *real smart*."

She's a hell of a thief. I never wanted to admit how much of Jay she got away with, but lately I can see him standing in her place, and I can be captivated by it. I don't have to hate her for it.

"I know, kid. And I'm sorry."

Bettina grimaces and bolts out of her chair. She takes a place in the middle of the kitchen and tries to look resigned. "Well," she chants,

“memorywork is both a means to an end and an end in itself. It fills the mind with well-known treasures and trains it to acquire even more. It is a skill!” Bettina flings with an arm and sighs with false passion. Her impersonation of Miss Shank is dead-on, and I have to laugh.

Bettina clears her throat severely. “I have a stunning repertoire. What would you like to hear?”

“What have you got?” I ask her. “Speeches? Poems?”

She gazes away, biting her tongue thoughtfully. “I have ‘Four Score and Twenty Years Ago.’ I have ‘Two Roads Submerged.’ I have a lot of weird political stuff, but only excerpts. ‘King’s Dream.’ ‘Kennedy’s New Frontier.’”

I worry about making a good choice. I feel a little stupid. “A poem of your choice,” I tell her. “Anything but that one about the roads.”

“All right.” Bettina looks anxious, but confident. “I have one that I kind of like.”

“I’m ready,” I tell her. I sit back and search for an attentive face, praying I won’t be bored. I am almost always bored. But when Bettina starts to speak, straining her voice to be louder, I know she’ll never bore me. Her poem is beautiful. Really, it is fantastic.